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CHRISTENSEN, Neil Blair

2003 *Inuit in Cyberspace - Embedding Offline Identities Online*, Copenhagen, Museum and Tusculanum Press and University of Copenhagen, 152 pages.

Neil Blair Christensen<sup>1</sup> has conducted an on-line field work on the use of cyberspace partly through a net survey from March till June 1998 in Alaska, Canada and Greenland, partly through nine months of e-mail correspondence with participants from the Aleutian Islands across Arctic Canada to East Greenland. One hundred and thirty-one persons out of about 1,000 potential participants across the Arctic responded to the survey and out of these, 70 persons supplied their e-mail address. Moreover, Christensen has analysed more than 300 Arctic Web sites. Christensen has included an appendix with results from the questionnaire which has 20 standardised questions and two open questions. Looking at some examples from this list, 57% males and 43% females responded to the survey, mostly from Canada (37%) and Alaska (35%)—22% of the respondents came from Greenland, 6% from “other places.” It also appears that 83% of the respondents use the Internet for e-mail correspondence and for surfing, and that 80% of the respondents connect to countries outside the Arctic (p. 113). Even so, more than half of the respondents think that the Internet will bring people in the entire Arctic closer together (p. 115). On the question whether information through the Internet brings the world into the Arctic or the other way round, 71% of the respondents think it works both ways. Moreover, 71% of the respondents think that cultural contents are important on Arctic Web pages.

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<sup>1</sup> The author has a MA degree in Eskimology and is a publishing manager for Blackwell Publishing. The title of his book shares the same title as his MA thesis from 1999 at the Department of Eskimology at the University of Copenhagen. His research field has included topics like identity, culture, distance education and the Internet. His origin is of mixed Danish-Jamaican parentage; born in Ittoqqortoormiit on the east coast of Greenland in 1971 and having lived in different places in Greenland from north to south until the age of 8, thereafter he moved to Denmark with his family (p. 25).

Christensen's declared intention with this fieldwork is to "discuss the cultural and identity affirming use of the Internet amongst Inuit—mainly in relation to the Web" (p. 12). Moreover his intension is—at a general level—to demystify the Internet and instead to show that there is in fact a correlation between the on-line cyberspace universe and the off-line physical universe (*ibid.*), which is shown through various examples from the fieldwork. However, reading the book leaves the impression that another important issue on *Inuit in Cyberspace* seems to be a reaction against the general stereotypical view of Inuit as gatherers and hunters living a static traditional life, which might be endangered by new technology like the Internet: "[...] While most research on cyberspace is focusing on the construction and power of new (cultural) identities on the Internet, my approach is quite the opposite, focusing on examples where modern information technology is used to assert those cultural identities that already exist offline: what I choose to call offline culture" (p. 13).

In his criticism of general research on cyberspace, Christensen argues against the constructed dichotomy between technology and culture, which "[...] connotes the idea of the fragmented and 'dissolute self' in the age of postmodernity [...]" (p. 12). On the contrary, Christensen argues, this idea cannot be applied to analyse most of the Inuit Web pages he has come across in the cyberspace research as these Web pages are characterized by "strong links to offline sociality, culture and physicality such as landscape" (*ibid.*). While the general theoretical rhetoric on the Internet is focused on globalisation, global processes, homogenisation, McDonaldsization, disembodiment, separation of mind and matter and on an abstract world theory, Christensen thinks that the outcome of his fieldwork among Inuit shows that Inuit generally relate to the global in a local manner (p. 99). Inuit, in spite of surfing the Net, watching foreign broadcasts and buying goods of all kind from countries far away, still "relate their cultural identities to spaces ranging from the rest of the world, the circumpolar region, down to the space of nucleus of relatives or friends within a specific community" (*ibid.*). One of the overall criticisms put forward in the book is that there has been too much focus on the abstract and global perspective of the Internet and less focus on the fact that users of the cyberspace actually are able to represent themselves in relation to cultural boundaries, to identity and in relation to local, regional and national boundaries—that be of social, economical, political and ethnic dimensions: "[...] In the same way that cybercultural groups identify with cyberspace as the location of their identities, Inuit identify with their locations. That cyberspace happens to be a location where Inuit reproduce, depict and assert other locations is not a peculiarity nor a sensation but an example of continuity and change" (p. 102).

In order to meet any objections to his own position as a member of the "out-group" in relation to the study of the "in-group" members of Inuit, Christensen makes an effort to present himself: "I grew up with the practicalities of social boundaries that were Greenlandic, Jamaican and Danish, and I believe I have gathered personal experience in the dynamics of cultural identity and social boundaries from early on. In regard to the Internet, I got my first computer and e-mail account in 1995 and I started using the Web in 1997" (p. 25).

Positioning himself in this context gives the reader, whether an “in-group” or “out-group” member of the studied target group, an opportunity to see through attitudes, and negative or positive stereotypes brought about in the text, which I personally find appreciative. There is no doubt that the author *is* a member of the “out-group” in relation to Inuit—which the text does not deny either. However, having been brought up in different Greenlandic settings in the early important years of his upbringing besides being gifted with different cultures through his parentage, Christensen manages—other things being equal—to describe his target group in a nuanced manner—at least for a Greenlandic reader as myself.

In conclusion, I want to remark that in relation to contemporary media research among Inuit, which is still scanty, I think it is an important piece of work which gives a good introductory impression of the general use of the Internet among Inuit across the Arctic. Christensen’s results confirm the results from my own fieldwork (since 1996) in collaboration with my colleague Jette Rygaard on Greenlandic children and youth’s media habits and media use, especially the aspect of the local, regional and national anchoring in relation to the global. Our results, like Christensen’s, show that there are strong emotions linked to the place where you belong and there is a practical approach to the use of the Internet: you can live in a remote place without standard facilities of the modern world and still be able to buy all sorts of exotic goods through the Net, get in touch with people from the other side of the World not knowing—but being fully aware of—whether the person you are in touch with is what he or she presents him/her to be, you can come across exotic places around the world. But still, if you ask the young people of their dreamplace if they could choose without limits, they still prefer their local area in the end. Even in your imagination you have to be practical (Pedersen 2001).

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